DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 455 972 PS 029 776

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TITLE	Working with Culturally & Linguistically Diverse Families. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, Champaign, IL.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-PS-01-4
PUB DATE	2001-08-00
NOTE	4p.
CONTRACT	ED-99-CO-0020
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, Children's Research Center, University of Illinois, 51 Gerty Dr., Champaign, IL 61820-7469. Tel: 800-583-4135 (Toll Free); Tel: 217-333-1386; Fax: 217-333-3767; Web site: http://ericeece.org; e-mail: ericeece@uiuc.edu. For full text: http://ericeece.org/pubs/digests.html.
PUB TYPE	ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Cross Cultural Training; *Cultural Awareness; Cultural Traits; Early Childhood Education; Family Characteristics; Family Environment; Family History; Family Needs; *Family School Relationship; *Family (Sociological Unit); Family Structure; *Intercultural Communication; *Interpersonal Relationship; Program Evaluation
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

During the 1990s, there was heightened awareness among early childhood researchers of the need to examine efforts to provide programs and services responsive to the needs and preferences of families of young children from diverse cultural and linguistic groups. This Digest presents strategies supported by the research literature to enhance interactions with families from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. After discussing issues involved in the development of relationships between professionals and the families they serve, the Digest suggests the following strategies for working with families: (1) respect the uniqueness of each family system; (2) develop a personalized relationship with families; (3) communicate in culturally appropriate ways; (4) recruit staff who view diversity as an asset; (5) create alliances with cultural guides; and (6) evaluate process and outcomes. (Contains 12 references.) (LPP)

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August 2001

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ERIC DIGEST
August 2001 • EDO-PS-01-4

Working with Culturally & Linguistically Diverse Families

Deborah A. Bruns & Robert M. Corso

The United States is one of the most culturally, ethnically, racially, and linguistically diverse countries in the world. During the 1990s, there was a heightened awareness among early childhood researchers of the need to examine efforts to provide programs and services responsive to the needs and preferences of families of young children from diverse cultural and linguistic groups (Lynch & Hanson, 1998; Quintero, 1999; Tabors, 1998). Because one approach may not be successful with all groups, researchers advise early childhood teachers and service providers to examine a range of strategies to enhance their relationships with families from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. It is useful for professionals to develop a common foundation of knowledge and practical strategies to address the needs of the families they serve, especially when the families' backgrounds are different from their own. This Digest presents strategies supported by the research literature to enhance interactions with families from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Supporting the Development of Relationships

A variety of interrelated issues and personal characteristics influence the development of relationships between professionals and those they serve, including family structure, age, length of time since immigration, and cultural expectations about early childhood services and outcomes. Researchers report the following areas as some of the most critical that affect the formation of effective helping relationships between families and early childhood professionals:

- Differences in roles and expectations (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999)
- Differences in personality characteristics (e.g., comfort in new situations, input in decisions) (Dinnebeil & Rule, 1994)
- Differences in worldview associated with cultural beliefs and acculturation (Lynch & Hanson, 1998)
- Differences in background of family and professionals (e.g., age, training) (Kochanek & Buka, 1998)

Strategies for Working Together in Early Education

Based on consideration of these areas of possible conflict, the following strategies are available to reduce the impact of these differences:

Respect the Uniqueness of Each Family System

Characteristics of the family system are often heavily influenced by a family's cultural values and beliefs. For example, researchers have found that, in some cultures, the family unit includes extended family members or clans composed of several households of relatives with a commitment to a family-based support network, while other families tend to focus on the immediate family and utilize external support networks (Gonzalez-Alvarez, 1998; Joe & Malach, 1998). Knowledge and understanding of the variety of family structures and systems increase the professional's ability to respond to the family's needs. In turn, respect for the diverse systems of family organization enhances a professional's effectiveness.

Develop a Personalized Relationship with Families

Families are more likely to develop effective working relationships with professionals they trust (Dinnebeil & Rule, 1994). Yet, this relationship may be forged in different ways. Some families may prefer a more formal relationship with early education professionals (Schwartz, 1995), while others may prefer a more informal, friendly relationship (Gonzalez-Alvarez, 1998). In some cultures, the father may be considered the head of the household and, therefore, may be responsible for making decisions for the rest of the family. In other cultures, the oldest female member of the household may hold the position of authority. Researchers in the early education field suggest that these issues need to be considered on a family-by-family basis, because intra-group differences are as great as inter-group differences (Lynch & Hanson, 1998). Awareness of these differences increases the likelihood of building effective relationships.

Communicate in Culturally Appropriate Ways

Cross-cultural differences in communication may also affect professional-family relationships. For example, researchers note that if professionals assume a dominant role in conversations, the submissive role in which the family is placed may be a source of tension and may result in family members withholding information (Dennis & Giangreco, 1996; Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, & Nishida, 1996). Communication of this type may be particularly offensive to some families from traditional Hispanic, Native American, and Asian backgrounds (Gonzalez-Alvarez, 1998; Joe & Malach, 1998; Schwartz, 1995, respectively). As discussed in the literature, knowledge of issues related to the use of translators and interpreters is important for early education professionals because communicating with linguistically diverse families often requires individuals fluent in the family's primary language to explain or clarify information related to programs and services (Ohtake, Santos, & Fowler, 2000).

It is also critical to maintain open, ongoing communication with families from diverse linguistic backgrounds. This communication may take the form of home-program notebooks, oral exchanges, or other modes of communication based on each family's preferences.

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Recruit Staff Who View Diversity as an Asset

Efforts should be made to hire bicultural and bilingual staff to increase an organization's ability to create trust between families and professionals. However, researchers note that what is even more essential is to hire staff who embrace diversity as an asset and demonstrate a willingness to learn about the experiences and traditions of individuals whose backgrounds are different from their own (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999). By recruiting such individuals, early childhood programs will substantially enhance their ability to work with families from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Create Alliances with Cultural Guides

It is important to encourage the participation of community leaders as "cultural guides" to facilitate communication and understanding between professionals and families (Lynch & Hanson, 1998). The literature describes several roles these individuals can play:

- Provide professionals with insights concerning community beliefs, values, and communication style (Dennis & Giangreco, 1996).
- Offer families information about programs and services in a culturally sensitive and responsive manner (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999).
- Act as facilitators to bring families and professionals closer together to reach desired outcomes (Joe & Malach, 1998).

Examples of cultural guides include community leaders, members of the clergy, and business leaders who are from the family's cultural group or who speak the family's primary language.

Evaluate Process and Outcomes

The final strategy addresses the need for ongoing evaluation of early childhood programs that serve diverse families. Evaluation can take several forms, such as asking families to complete surveys or sharing information through face-to-face or phone interviews. Early education professionals may also participate in program improvement activities by conducting a needs assessment to identify areas for training and then self-evaluating their knowledge and skills in those areas. As the research literature indicates, with collaboration from bicultural/bilingual staff and cultural guides, information can be collected in ways that match families' preferences (Schwartz, 1995, Tabors, 1998). In turn, early education professionals can use this information to improve their programs and their interactions with families.

Summary

The preceding discussion describes strategies to support the development of relationships and enhance communication between early education professionals and families. It is only through developing a better understanding of the beliefs, values, and preferences of families that early education professionals can gain a broad perspective and offer effective programming (Quintero, 1999). Just as young children develop and grow, early education professionals must continually work to heighten their awareness of cultural and linguistic diversity, improve their professional skills, and work to develop a shared vision of early education with all families.

Note: *This Digest was based on a review of the early education, cross-cultural, and communication literature conducted by the Early Childhood Research Institute on Culturally & Linguistically Appropriate Services (CLAS; http://clas.uiuc.edu).*

For More Information

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This project has been funded at least in part with Federal funds from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, under contract number ED-99-CO-0020. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.